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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

Baltimore, February, 1902.

## THE USE OF EPISODE IN THE TEACHING OF FICTION.

WITHIN the last decade the study of narrative fiction has won its way to an assured place in the English work of our schools and colleges. Instructors have come to recognize not only the especial force and value of ethical teaching when carried in the story-form, but the chance for original thought which is offered by the technical analysis of great novels. The very keenest interest can be aroused in students by the discovery of æsthetic principles in narratives hitherto thought of simply as narratives. In conducting my course in Fiction Analysis in this University I have devoted almost my entire attention to this aspect of narrative, and have applied to a number of English novels the sort of tests usually applied to Shakspeare's plays, for instance, when their dramatic construction is under discussion. Such points would be the plot outline, the character grouping, the expression of theme, the function of characters, the reason for each episode, the method of character-presentation, the position and value of pause, the use of retard, contrast, and restraint, the distribution of monologue, dialogue, and group-scenes, the intermixture of dramatic, epic, and lyric in the presentation of the story,—and so on. A pamphlet of questions drawn up by me on such lines, and published by our University Press, is used by my classes. The novels thus analyzed are, at present, *Emma*, *Guy Mannering*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Vanity Fair*, *Adam Bede*, *House of the Seven Gables*, *Put Yourself in His Place*, *The Egoist*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. A twelve-weeks' course is occupied in the discussions, of which the first two weeks are given up to lectures on the development of English narrative; during this time the class is supposed to get fairly started in the reading necessary for the course. Thereafter one novel is discussed each week, the work on each closing with a lecture by the instructor, on that author. The class is also required to write weekly papers, beginning with the third

novel studied, when some degree of familiarity with technical analysis has been gained. These papers are, at present, on the following topics:—The American Episode in *Martin Chuzzlewit*,—The Brussels Episode in *Vanity Fair*,—The Coming-of-Age Celebration in *Adam Bede*,—The chapter entitled "The Flight of Two Owls," in the *House of Seven Gables*,—A comparative study of these four episodes,—The Creation of a Central Figure in *Emma* and in *The Egoist*, compared,—The Treatment of Subordinate Figures and of Background in *Adam Bede* and in *Tess*, compared.

Any teacher will observe the gradual increase of difficulty in this series of problems; but no teacher who has not attempted to conduct such analysis with a class can realize the value of the first four subjects, and the way in which each selection so epitomizes the peculiarities of its author as to permit of generalizations and comparisons theoretically impossible on so limited a basis. Take, for example, the five chapters, 28 to 33, of *Vanity Fair*.

Like the American Episode in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the Waterloo episode is a sudden and great enlargement of the background. By Dickens a new country is opened before the reader, by Thackeray the events and issues of world-history are drawn into the story. Observe, however, the different treatment by the two authors of this enlarged scene. Dickens loses sight of his main purpose and diverges to satirize the follies and vices of American society; Thackeray does not permit the thought of even Napoleon or Wellington to tempt him from his chosen path. Near as is the field of Waterloo, we see and hear it only at a very few moments. Its presence and its pressure are constantly felt, but are recognized by us through the emotions we see excited in the group of characters we are watching. Twice we see the dismay caused by the sound of cannon coming from the unseen struggle; between these two waves of fear comes the wounded ensign's report of the earlier encounter; and twice the curtain goes up to show to us a single figure on the field,—first Rawdon wrapped in his cloak under the rain, and then after a brief description of the

Guard's last charge, the single dead figure of George, lying on his face with a bullet through his heart.

From one point of view, the episode exists mainly to accomplish this last-named fact,—the removal of George Osborne from the story. So with Dickens' episode, its plot-purpose was the effecting of one thing, the change in Martin's nature. But in Dickens' case not only was that change effected abruptly, crudely, forcibly as it were, but nothing else was done for plot or theme or main characters; on the contrary, we were distracted by a panorama of new characters unrelated to the story, who eventually disappear with the suddenness of a Harlequin.

With Thackeray all is different. First, the transition to Brussels is natural and expected; all the main characters are here, and our attention is centred unwaveringly on them, with no sudden changes to England. Again, the relation of the Brussels episode to the Becky plot is as distinct as its relation to the Amelia-George-Dobbin plot. Here Becky first finds real scope for her social and dramatic powers. The affair with Lady Bareacres preludes her later struggles with her own sex; General Tufto is the forerunner of the Marquis of Steyne; and the success of Becky at the Duchess of Richmond's ball heralds the theatricals at Gaunt House. The Brussels episode is a link in the chain of Becky's social successes and failures,—Russell Square, Queen's Crawley, Brighton, Brussels, Paris, Curzon Street, Gaunt House,—and each episode is an integral part of the plot, picaresque though the succession of episodes may be. With Dickens we can trace episode within episode; for example, the Elijah Pogram levee within the American Episode; and in the smaller case as in the larger there is a total lack of correlation of episode to theme and plot of the main story. In Thackeray, however, look at a bit like the dinner which George gives the Earl of Bareacres' family. Small though its scale is, episode within episode though it is, it not only illuminates the character of George and the weak devotion of his wife, but it is made a part of the plot in that it shows how the Osbornes got their invitation to the Richmond ball, where the entanglement of George with

Becky becomes serious, and it echoes the keynote of the book,—the vanity of human wishes.

Indeed, the whole Brussels episode not only advances plot, but even more markedly illuminates character and theme. Waterloo and Napoleon are utilized by the novelist to bring the tremendous pressure of fear on to the personages of *Vanity Fair*, and "turn upon them the searchlight of great events." The moment at which Thackeray chooses to show us the inmost heart of his men and women is a moment at which the destiny of empires is in the balance. Yet of that destiny he does not choose that we shall think; we are to see only his little circle of characters. This use of the great to illuminate the less is markedly Thackerayan. When he says: "Napoleon landed at Cannes, and the funds fell, and old John Sedley was ruined,"—this is not an anticlimax, it is the normal movement of Thackeray's thought, which is centred always on the poor little, peeping, anxious, human face behind the mask of dignities and ceremonies and sounding events. Thus Waterloo is not for him the Waterloo that appeared to Victor Hugo; it is the fire by which to test his characters. He uses the great world-event not only to emphasize the main note in each personage,—Becky's heartless egoism, Amelia's absorbed devotion, Jos's cowardice,—but also to bring out the possibilities of other traits. Mrs. O'Dowd is brave and unselfish; the most commonplace and absurd of the three women becomes a heroic and generous figure standing between two extreme types of selfish courage, Amelia and Becky; Amelia flashes out once in unexpected spirit; Becky is, for one of the few times in her life, "touched in spite of herself;" and Rawdon shows for the first time those qualities that are later to bring him up in our sympathetic esteem. Thackeray here as elsewhere loves to touch on the contrast between the outward appearance or character and the inward feeling. As he has elsewhere said of Becky that an unexpected kindness "brought tears into the eyes of our resolute little adventuress," so he here says of Rawdon:

"And this famous dandy of Windsor and Hyde Park went off on his campaign with a kit as modest as that of a sergeant, and with

something like a prayer on his lips for the woman he was leaving."

Contrast, in character and in situation, is everywhere in these chapters, done by touches or *in extenso*. Thus, when the wounded ensign tells his story, it was George who cut down the French lancer that speared the boy, but it was Dobbin who, though wounded himself, carried the lad in his arms to a cart bound for Brussels, and promised the driver two louis if he would find out Mrs. George Osborne's hotel and tell her that her husband was unhurt and well. We see Rawdon, bivouacking under the rain and thinking with all the force of his heart of the little wife he had left behind him, while she, having counted her valuables and felt sure of looking her widow's weeds steadily in the face, is asleep dreaming of perhaps becoming Mme. la Maréchale in the event of French victory. Earlier, there were the three partings; Mrs. O'Dowd's practical wifeliness contrasted with Amelia's helpless agony and with Becky's calculating heartlessness. And there are also contrasts on a larger scale; the comedy action of Jos' cowardice is before our eyes while the tragedy of other men's bravery is going on out of sight. Situations are contrasted,—George's shame as he looks at his innocent wife and thinks of his folly a few hours before, Amelia's temporary triumph over Becky with the defeat of the night just past,—and many others. Lastly, when the episode closes with Amelia on her knees praying for George, and the curtain rises to show us his dead figure even while she prays, we remember a ball and a bouquet, and feel that the great artist who wrote this story within a story never for one moment forgot his theme,—the Vanity of Human Wishes,—never forgot the eternal contrast between our immortality and our mortality.

The same unity of total impression, every detail made "eloquent of one idea," as Stevenson says, gives *Adam Bede* the first place among George Eliot's works. In studying the episode chosen from *Adam Bede*, the class is at first puzzled by the great length at which minor events and background characters are presented; the plot scarcely moves, and no further development of the principal personages takes place. But a closer examination

shows the function of these chapters in the plot,—an emphasizing summary of all the happy past, a pause just before the climax, an ominous stillness before the storm breaks; and all the more tragic in its lightheartedness, all the more ominous in its calm because of the optimism of the unsuspecting group on which the blow is to fall. The whole episode is a study in ironic contrast. There are the details of Hetty's vain hopes, of Arthur's confident eagerness, of Adam's proud pleasure, of Mr. Poyser's serene trust in his young Squire, expressed in his dinner-speech and in the final touch of bitter mockery with which the episode closes—"It'll serve you to talk on, Hetty, when you're an old woman, how you danced wi' the young Squire the day he come o'age."

The episode, like those from Dickens and Thackeray, is an expansion of the background; both social classes are together on the stage. No very different light is however thrown upon the main characters; George Eliot's purpose seems to have been the emphatic restatement, just before the fatal discovery, of her constant thought, the solidarity of society, the awful burden of human responsibility when complicated with class-responsibility, the socially destructive consequences of individual sin. Her treatment of the story of Hetty and Arthur is remarkable for this persistent view of the *social* aspect of the crime. When Hawthorne treats the consequences of a crime, as he does in his *Seven Gables*, the retribution is personal or hereditary only; the conception, intenser than George Eliot's, is narrower. And when we look at Hardy's treatment of a situation resembling that chosen by George Eliot, we find him handling it not with the constant thought of social consequences but with the central idea of the position forced on Angel Clare and his wife, the feeling for the *individual* situation.

In George Eliot the treatment of the episode resembles the treatment of the whole book in its emphasis upon the framing background. The atmosphere of rural peace is so pervasive in *Adam Bede* that in asking a class, as I often do with regard to a novel, what their most permanent visual impression of the book is, I receive almost invariably the reply—a green

country landscape, with the Poyser homestead. Behind the tragedy of the central story, enveloping it as it were, there is a broad tranquil sunny background of everyday human life, of rural calm. We must realize the enormous value of this background for the artistic effectiveness of the book. It emphasizes the temporary nature of the passing tragedy, it constitutes the norm to the central distortion of wrong and pain. George Eliot has made her story universally true and pathetic in that she has framed the agony of the few in the enclosing phlegmatic calm of nature. In such a book as Hardy's *Tess* the tension becomes over-great by the absence of adequate background; in a book like D'Annunzio's *Triumph of Death* the whole countryside is made to share the spasms of the protagonist. D'Annunzio is the less an artist, George Eliot is the more an artist, because the one disregards, the other aims at, one of the larger truths of life,—the ever-present tragic contrast of a serenely moving world-law with the fevers of humanity. This thought for the framing background, human and natural, is especially clear in the episode from *Adam Bede*. In fact, as I have said, the four episodes selected are very fair examples of the work of their authors; and if taken up in the order named they offer a steady increase in difficulty to the student, from the almost ostentatious crudity of Dickens' work to the microscopic attention to symbolic detail seen in Hawthorne. The interest taken by a class in interpreting this symbolism, in connecting Chapter 17 of the *Seven Gables* with the earlier chapter called "The Arched Window," for example, is extraordinary, and carries them over the difficulty which they invariably experience in adapting their visual range, after working in Thackeray and George Eliot, to the minuteness of the *Seven Gables*, where plot is transformed into protracted situation, and where details take the place of episodes.

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### THE DEVELOPMENT OF TAINE CRITICISM SINCE 1893.

#### I.

AN attempt was made in 1899 by Wetz in *Zts. Spr. Litt.*, xxii, pp. 114-251, to give an estimate of later Taine-criticism. This article

is largely analytical, and does not attempt any résumé of the progress or development of Taine-criticism, to show how the opinion of critics in general, and of some individual critics in particular, has changed during the short time between his death in 1893, and the present day. The article does not include some of the more important works, confining itself to only eight critics. The present review proposes a discussion of the value of the important articles and works on Taine, and a statement of the progress criticism has made, in regard to the value, significance and importance of Taine's work.

The latest work on Taine, Giraud's *Essai sur Taine*, Hachette, 1901, by far the most complete and satisfactory treatise on the subject, gives an almost complete bibliography of his works in chronological order (published in *Rev. Hist. Litt. Fr.*, July, October, 1900), and of books and articles on Taine. The statistics of this bibliography show more than one hundred and seventy-five references before 1893, and over two hundred and twenty-five from 1893-1901. It is but natural that the criticisms before his death are mainly personal differences of opinion on the function and method of criticism, on the possibilities of the application of his system to both the natural and physical sciences. Many deal with his conception of the world, and among these some are extremely bitter and pessimistic, showing him to be a rank pessimist, destructive materialist, as Caro; absolute determinist and positivist, as Scherer; a firm sceptic, a Spinoza pantheist, as Planche. Such articles, however, emanate from the opposite school of philosophy or from close sectarians. Among all these criticisms there are very few that show an appreciation of the wider scope and significance of Taine's work. Mahrenholtz, Wetz, Pellissier, Sorel, Bourget, Brunetière, and a few of the English and American critics have given the broadest and most liberal estimates of his system and position in the history of literature; but the true meaning of Taine's work was not generally realized in France until after his death. The later critics, Deschamps, Monod, Barzellotti, Faguet, Giraud, and Wetz, are able to treat him from a more liberal and broader, yet at times individual point of view, showing more perspective, comprehension, and appreciation of his work as a whole, than